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THE DRY TREE: SYMBOL
OF DEATH

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THE DRY TREE: SYMBOL OF DEATH

IN the thirteenth century the legend of the Dry Tree was extraordinarily popular. The Dry Tree itself was located definitely by the voyagers, it was placed on maps, it gave its name to the Paris street, the "Rue de l'Arbre-Sec,"¹ which was constructed in part at this time, it is believed, and which, according to tradition, took its name from a sign that was still to be seen on an old house near St. Germain l'Auxerrois as late as 1660.

It may seem a far cry from a mediæval signpost to a pre-Christian symbol of death, but something like such a progression, or retrogression, is revealed to the examiner of the legend of the Dry Tree in its development from its first recorded appearance before it has become dry, on a Babylonian cylinder seal of 2000 B. C., now to be seen in the British Museum, to its use in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to indicate a definite locality visited by holy pilgrims and adventurous knights. Since the beginning of time man has attempted to explain the presence of death in the world, and has likewise sought to find some escape from the recognition of this devastating blight to the enjoyment of life while it lasts, by the explanation that death is due to a mistake which can be corrected. The correction will then do away with the everlastingness of death. And so he has comforted himself by connecting the symbols of death which he has devised with corresponding emblems of his hope of survival after death. The story which accounts for the entrance of death into the world becomes, therefore, in time the mystic proto-

¹ F. and L. Lazare, *Dictionnaire des rues et monuments de Paris*, Paris, ed. 2, p. 167.

type of the coming of life. The story of the Dry Tree is of interest since it illustrates with beautiful concreteness the stages of this effort on the part of our primitive ancestors in the early ages of the world to explain what is most difficult for the human being of any time to understand. By the somewhat ironic operation of the curious law which is always confronting the worker in the evolution of story material with what comes to be an expected surprise, the symbolic is read in the course of time by some literal-minded, or insufficiently informed, individual or generation and is henceforth made a concrete fact. This common, but always thought-arresting, phenomenon occurs in the history of the Dry Tree. So the symbol conceived by the imagination in its effort to illustrate death, and finally immortality, becomes a literal tree to be visited by voyagers.

§1

Any traveler was famous in the Middle Ages who had been to the Dry Tree. Knights and pilgrims claimed the honor. It is said to have marked the eastern extremity of the known world; but the writers of the period, as the following extracts reveal, show no agreement as to its situation. Its significance as "the back of beyond," or the holiest of holy places, is perhaps sufficiently indicated by the frequently recurring phrase, "even to the Dry Tree." In the thirteenth century *Jus du Pelerin*, the "pelerin" boasts of his wanderings:

Bien a trente et chienc ans que je n'ai aresté,
 S'ai puis en maint bon lieu et à maint saint esté,
 S'ai esté au *Sec-Arbre* et dusc'à Duresté;
 Dieu grasci qui m'en a sens et pooir presté.
 Si fui en Famenie, en Surie et en Tir;
 S'alai en un país où on est si entir
 Que on i muert errant quant on i veut mentir,
 Et si est tout quemun.²

² L. J. N. Monmerqué et F. X. Michel, *Théâtre français au moyen âge*, Paris, 1842, p. 97.

In the *Roman du Comte de Poitiers*, also of the thirteenth century, Constantine makes the threat that if the amiral does not release his uncle he will destroy everything even to the Dry Tree.³ Again in a later romance, *Li Bastars de Buillon*, of the fourteenth century the emphasis is the same:

“Bauduins li gentis, de Jherusalem roys;
li linages du Chisne vous a mis en maus plois,
Vo terre en ert perdue, abatue vo lois;
Desci jusqu’au *Sec Arbre* n’arés un soel tornois,”
Si faitement disoit le poeples beneois.⁴

Still more impressive does it become when it appears in such a list as that in which The World, in the *Castell of Perseverance*, enumerates the lands that are his:

Assarye, Acaye, and Almayne, ✓
Canadoyse, Capadoyse, and Cananee,
Babyloyn, Brabon, Burgoyne, and Bretayne,
Grece, Galys and to þe Gryckysch see;
I meue also Massadoyne in my mykyl mayne,
Frauns, Flaundrys, and Freslonde, and also Normande,
Pyncecras, Parys, and longe Pygmayne,
And euery toun in Trage, euyn to þe *dreye tre*,
Rodis and ryche Rome,
All þese londis, at myn a-vyse
Arn castyn to my werdly wyse;
My tresoror, Syr Coueytyse,
Hath sesyd hem holy to me.⁵

Somewhat more interesting than such lists of names are two other passages. The first, one of the earliest in the romances, is that which occurs in *Li Jus de Saint Nicholai*, by Jean Bodel, written in the first half of the thirteenth century. Here the *Émir de l’Arbre Sec* is a character of dramatic importance. The King of Africa has called his lords together to assist him in war against the Christians.

³ Ed. Francisque Michel, Paris, 1831, pp. 54, 68.

⁴ Ed. A. Scheler, Brussels, 1877, p. 9.

⁵ *E. E. T. S., Ex. Ser.*, XCI, 1904, p. 82.

All respond. Among them are the "amiraus" del Coine, d'Orkenie, d'Oliferne and du *Sec-Arbre*. By a miracle, the king is converted to Christianity. A Christian prisoner, accused of stealing the king's treasure and condemned to death, is granted a day in which he prays successfully to Saint Nicholas, who appears to the thieves and forces them to return their spoil. On finding that the treasure has been marvelously increased, the king believes in Saint Nicholas, renounces Mahomet, and insists that his retainers follow his example. *Sec Arbre* alone resists, and in a lively scene in which he is baptized by force he bravely asserts to Saint Nicholas his steady allegiance to Mahomet:

Sains Nicolais, c'est maugré mien
Que je vous aoure, et par forche.
De moi n'arés-vous fors l'escorche:
Par parole devienng vostre hom;
Mais li creanche est en Mahom.⁶

The second reference is found in Machaut's *Dit du Lion* (1342) in a sprightly episode in which the claims of the lovers are described when they take leave of their ladies:

Et quant venoit au congié prendre,
Il n'estoient pas a aprendre,
Eins disoient, savés comment?
"Ma dame, a vous me recombant!
Vous poués seur moy commender
Et moy penre sens demender;
Car vostre sui entierement
Pour faire vo commandement."
Atant se partoient de la.
Après chascuns disoit: "Vela
Celui qui vainqui la bataille
Entre Irlande et Cornuaille."
L'autre disoit: "Par saint Thommas!
Mais plus: il revient de Damas,
D'Anthioche, de Damiette,

⁶ Monmerqué et Michel, *Théâtre français au moyen âge*, p. 207.

D'Acre, de Baruch, de Sajette,
 De Sardinay, de Siloë,
 De la monteinge Gilboë,
 De Sion, dou mont de Liban,
 De Nazareth, de Taraban,
 De Josaphat, de Champ Flori,
 Et d'Escauvaire ou Dieu mori,
 Tout droit, et de Jherusalem.
 Dieu pri qu'il le gart de mal an.
 Car s'il vit, e'iert un Alixandre."
 —"Aussi fu il en Alixandre,"
 Dit l'autre, "en en mont Synaï."
 Et l'autre disoit: "Si n'a y
 Homme qui a li se compere,
 Ne dont tant de bien nous appere.
Car il fu jusqu'a l'Aubre Sec,
Ou li oisil pendent au bec."
 Et quant les dames en öoient
 Le bien dire, et si l'i trouvoient,
 Plus les en devoient par droit
 Encherir selone leur endroit.⁷

§2

The tales of the voyagers supplement these references drawn from the dramas and romances of the period, in which the interest is confined more or less to the geographical location of the Dry Tree. Oderic de Pordenone (1286-1331), who places the Dry Tree on the mount of Mamre not far from Hebron, says that the tree has stood there since the beginning of the world, and that it died when Christ was crucified. The account in Mandeville,⁸ based, according to Bovenschen,⁹ on Oderic, is that which is best known.

And .ij. myle from Ebron is the graue of loth þat was Abrahames broþer. And a lytill fro Ebron is the mount of Mambre, of the

⁷ *Euvres, Société des anciens textes français*, 1911, II, pp. 208-209.

⁸ For authorship, see P. Hamelius, *Quarterly Review*, April, 1917; J. E. Wells, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, Yale Press, 1916.

⁹ *Johann von Mandeville und die Quellen seiner Reisebeschreibung*, *Zt. für Erdkunde*, XXIII, 1888, p. 238.

which the valeye taketh his name, And þere is a tree of Oke þat the Sarazines clepen *Dirpe* þat is of Abrahames tyme, the which men clepen the *drye tree*. And þei seye þat it hath ben þere sithe the begynnynge of the world, and was sumtyme grene and bare leues vnto the tyme þat oure lord dyede on the cros And þanne it dryede and so diden all the trees þat weren þanne in the world . . . And summe seyn be here prophecyes þat a lord, a Prince of the west syde of the world schall wynnen the lond of promyscioun þat is the holy lond with helpe of cristene men and he schall do synge a masse vnder þat *drye tree* and þan the tree schall wexen grene and bere bothe fruyt and leues. And þorgh þat myracle manye Sarazines and Jewes schull ben turned to cristene feyth.¹⁰

The prophecy concerning the Prince of the West is not found, it will be noted, in Oderic. Bovenschen thinks Mandeville based this portion of his narrative on the popular story of Frederick Barbarossa, of which there were many versions in the fourteenth century.¹¹ Two German poems of the century speak of Frederick's coming again: when he hangs his shield on the Dry Tree it will become green, and he will win the Holy Sepulchre.

so wirt das *vrlewg also gross*,
 nymand kan ez gestillen,
 so kumt sich *kayser Fridrich* der her vnd auch der milt,
 er vert dort her durch gotes willen,
 an einen *dürren pawm* so *henkt er seinen schilt*,
 so wirt die vart hin uber mer . . .
 er vert dort hin zum *dürren pawm* an alles widerhap
 dar an so *henkt er seinen schilt*,
 er *grunet unde pirt*:
 so wirt *gewun daz heilig grap*,
 daz nymmer swert darup gezogen wirt.¹²

The oak of Mamre was, however, famous ages before the thirteenth century. Oderic simply adds to the well-established tradition of a holy tree the explanation that

¹⁰ Mandeville's *Travels*, E. E. T. S., Orig. Ser., CLIII, 1919, pp. 44, 45.

¹¹ Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 4 Ausg., II Bd., ss. 797-802.

¹² *Ibid.*, s. 799. Cf. also Alfred Bassermann, *Veltro, Gross-Chan und Kaisersage*, *Neue Heidelberger Jahrbücher*, XI, 1902, pp. 52, 53, and R. Schroeder, *Die Deutsche Kaisersage*, 1893, pp. 22, 23.

the tree died when Christ was crucified. The process of Christianization was begun long before. As early as the seventh century Arculf records that the tombs of Abram, Isaac, Jacob and Adam are to be found at Hebron, and that there is still to be seen the stump of the oak of Mamre, which is also called the oak of Abraham because under it he received the angels. Arculf cites St. Jerome as his authority for saying that the oak has stood there from the beginning of the world. Early in the twelfth century Saewulf¹³ gives practically the same account, adding the wives of the patriarchs to the list of those buried in the holy place. However, in his version the oak still flourishes.

These explanations by the pilgrims of the sanctity of the tree in turn replace earlier ones. The oak of Mamre was one of the most famous of the sacred oaks venerated from remote ages. If in later times the worship of trees was denounced by the Hebrew prophets, there is evidence that Jehovah himself was associated with them earlier. God appeared to Abraham in the likeness of three men under the oak of Mamre. Eusebius¹⁴ testifies that the tree remained there until his time, early in the fourth century, and was still revered as divine. He refers to a holy picture representing the three mysterious guests who partook of Abraham's hospitality under the tree. The middle one of the three figures, which excelled the others in honor, he identified with the Lord himself.

A most interesting document for the present study is a description by the church historian, Sozomenus, of the festival held at the sacred tree down to the time of Constantine:

¹³ *Early Travels in Palestine*, ed. Wright, London, 1848, pp. 7, 45. It is curious to note that this type of story persisted as late as the sixteenth century. Sir Richard Guylforde, in his *Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* (Camden Society Publications, 1857), repeats the story of Abraham and the angels, but adds that the tree is now "wasted," and that another tree has sprung from the root of the old one.

¹⁴ Migne, *Patrol. Graeca*, XXII, 384. Cf. J. G. Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, 1918, III, p. 57.

I must now relate the decree which the Emperor Constantine passed with regard to what is called the oak of Mamre . . . It is a true tale that with the angels sent against the people of Sodom the Son of God appeared to Abraham and told him of the birth of his son. There every year a famous festival is still held in summer time by the people of the neighborhood as well as by the inhabitants of the more distant parts of Palestine and by the Phoenicians and Arabians. Very many also assemble for trade, to buy and sell; for every one sets great store on the festival. The Jews do so because they pride themselves on Abraham as their founder; the Greeks do so on account of the visit of the angels; and the Christians do so also because there appeared at that time to the pious man One who in after ages made himself manifest through the Virgin for the salvation of mankind. Each, after the manner of his faith, does honour to the place, some praying to the God of all, some invoking the angels and pouring wine, or offering incense, or an ox, or a goat, or a sheep, or a cock . . . But at the time of the festival no one draws water from the well. For, after the Greek fashion, some set burning lamps there; others poured wine on it, or threw in cakes, money, perfumes or incense. On that account, probably, the water was rendered unfit to drink by being mixed with the things thrown into it. The performance of these ceremonies according to Greek ritual was reported to the Emperor Constantine by his wife's mother who had gone to the place in fulfillment of a vow.¹⁵

"Thus it appears," says Frazer, "that at Hebron an old heathen worship of the sacred tree and the sacred well survived in full force down to the establishment of Christianity."

Following the line just explored backward as far as it is traceable, then, we find a voyager's story attached to the usual pilgrim's account of a journey to the Holy Land. The pilgrim's account, in turn, reveals the fact that a Christian legend has supplanted a local pre-Christian explanation of the fame of a special tree—the oak of Mamre—which was worshiped in earliest times as a sacred tree.

¹⁵ Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, III, pp. 59, 60. Sozomenus (fifth century), *Hist. Eccles.*, II, 4. Migne, *Patrol. Graeca*, LXVII, 941, 944.

§3

The tradition examined places the tree in Hebron and identifies it with the celebrated oak of Mamre. Another early voyager, Marco Polo (c. 1254-1324), locates it differently:

When you depart from this City of Cobinan, you find yourself again in a Desert of surpassing aridity, which lasts for some eight days; here are neither fruits nor trees to be seen, and what water there is is bitter and bad, so that you have to carry both food and water . . . At the end of those eight days you arrive at a Province which is called Tonocain. It has a good many towns and villages, and forms the extremity of Persia towards the North. It also contains an immense plain on which is found the *Arbre Sol*, which we Christians call the *Arbre Sec*; and I will tell you what it is like. It is a tall and thick tree, having the bark on one side green and the other white; and it produces a rough husk like that of a chestnut, but without anything in it. The wood is yellow like box, and very strong, and there are no other trees near it, nor within a hundred miles of it, except on one side, where you find trees within about ten miles' distance. And there, the people of the country tell you, was fought the battle between Alexander and King Darius.¹⁶

The celebrated tree is found also on maps in the Middle Ages. Those of the fifteenth century, such as those of Andrea Bianco (1436) and Fra Mauro (1459), on which the Dry Tree is found, may be ascribed to the influence of Marco Polo's own work. But the Dry Tree appears also on the thirteenth-century Hereford map by Richard de Haldingham. It is placed in the vicinity of India and the Terrestrial Paradise. The tree is marked with the rubric, "*Albor Balsami est Arbor Sicca.*"¹⁷

¹⁶ *Marco Polo*, ed. Yule-Cordier, I, pp. 127-128. The editors call attention to the variation of these terms found in the different texts; for instance, Pauthier has here "*L'Arbre Solque*, que nous appelons *L'Arbre Sec*," and in a later passage "*L'Arbre Seul*, que le *Livre Alexandre* appelle *Arbre Sec*." See also the editors' notes for other places mentioned in oriental travels as possessing *dry trees*, such as Tabriz, Tauris.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 133, 134. The original is in Hereford Cathedral. An excellent reproduction is found in Santarem.

§4

So far the location of the Dry Tree and the spread of the legend by the romancers and travelers have been considered. Of the significance of the tree—the reason why it was used by the writers—nothing has hitherto been said. Another type of description than that used by the travelers or the pilgrims without doubt accounts better for the fame of the tree. It was seen by Alexander, by Bors in a dream, and by Seth when he was sent by Adam to Paradise for the oil of mercy. And these visions of the tree, though different, are all symbolic. Equating them brings us to something like a clear point.

In the various versions of the Alexander story the tree is found connected with the trees of the sun and moon, a connection that is not without importance. In the *Wars of Alexander*, for instance, Alexander is asked by the god whom he finds reclining on a bed if he wishes to learn his fate from the trees of the sun and moon. When he replies that he does, he is straightway taken through a wood to a bare tree on which sits a phoenix.

- (1. 4978) *Pai fande a ferly faire tre : quare-on na frute groued,
Was void of all hire verdure : and vacant of leues,
A hundreth fote and a halfe : It had of lezt large,
With-uten bark ouþir bast : full of bare pirnes.
þar bade a brid on a boghe : a-bofe in þe topp,
Was of a port of a paa : with sike a proude crest,
With bathe þe chekis and þe chauyls : as a chykin brid,
And all gilden was hire gorg : with golden fethirs,
All hire hames be-hind : was hewid as a purpure.
And all þe body and þe brest : and on þe bely vndire
Was finely florischt and faire : with frekild pennys,
Of gold graynes and of goules : full of gray maseles.*

* * * * *

Zone is a fereles foule : a Fenix we calle.¹⁸

After this unexplained sight, Alexander is conducted to

¹⁸ *The Wars of Alexander* (1400-1450), translated chiefly from the *Historia Alexandri Magni de Preliis* (tenth century), ed. W. W. Skeat, *E. E. T. S., Ex. Ser.*, XLVII, 1886.

the sun-tree, which is like gold, and the moon-tree, which is like silver. The sun-tree tells him he will not return home, the moon-tree that he will die in twenty months.

This episode of the Dry Tree appears very early in the development of the Alexander romances. Indeed, one of the most elaborate accounts is found in the Syriac version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes which is dated between the fifth and the tenth centuries.¹⁹ The figure reclining on the couch is here called Dionysus. "An effulgence shot forth from him like the lightening flash. Over him was spread a garment worked with gold and emeralds and other precious stones in the form of a vine. . . ."²⁰ Nothing is said, however, of the trees of the sun and moon, though Alexander later sees them. The Dry Tree with the phoenix in its boughs he had seen before he reached the temple: "And in the midst of that place there was a bird sitting upon a tree without leaves and without fruit, and it had upon its head something like the rays of the sun, and they called the bird the 'palm-bird' (phoenix)."²¹ The tenth-century Latin version by the Archpresbyter Leo also contains a brief account of the tree "quae non habebat fructum neque folia" and the bird "quae habebat super caput suum lucentes radios sicut sol."²²

The two trees found by Alexander in Paradise are said by Jeremias²³ to represent life and death in the cosmic sanctuary (Paradise). They are explained by Winckler

¹⁹ *The History of Alexander the Great*, ed. E. A. W. Budge, Cambridge, 1889, p. lx.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102. In the Ethiopian version, the date of which is unknown, the god on the couch is said to be Enoch. Alexander has become a Christian king. Cf. *The Life and Exploits of Alexander the Great* (Ethiopic text), ed. E. A. W. Budge, London, 1896, II, p. 158.

²¹ *The History of Alexander the Great*, ed. E. A. W. Budge, p. 101.

²² *Der Alexanderroman des Archipresbyters Leo*, ed. F. Pfister, Heidelberg, 1913, p. 111. Cf. also O. Zingerle, *Die Quellen zum Alexander des Rudolf von Ems*, im Anhang: *Die Historia de Prelüs*, *Germanistische Abhandlungen*, IV, Breslau, 1885; and F. Pfister, *Die Historia de Prelüs und das Alexandererepos des Quilichinus*, *Münchener Museum für Philologie des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, I, 1912, Heft 3.

²³ Alfred Jeremias, *The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient East*, Engl. ed., 1911, I, p. 24.

as sun and moon, day and night, lightness and darkness, life and death, good and evil. Sometimes the opposing qualities are combined in a single tree, as in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which stands at the limit of the earth where the kingdoms of the dead and the living meet.²⁴ Whatever the significance of the sun and moon trees in general, they do in Alexander's case mean that he will die, and that shortly. Dionysus, who is often identified with Osiris, is probably also here the lord of death and life.²⁵ The bare tree with the phoenix sitting upon it is intended certainly to reveal death to Alexander, but probably with the added hope of resurrection. We have here a strikingly effective use of a well-known symbol. The phoenix represented immortality in pre-Christian times.²⁶ An impressive evidence of its antiquity is that given by Budge when he connects it with "Osiris-neb-Heh, *i.e.*, Osiris, Lord of Eternity, who appears in the form of a mummy with the head of the Bennu-bird, or phoenix. This name proves that the idea of an existence renewed and prolonged indefinitely was associated with the Bennu-bird at a very early period."²⁷ Moreover, the phoenix is found in the first centuries on tombs as an emblem of resurrection. In a mosaic in the church of Saint Cosmo and Saint Damian of the sixth century there is seen a phoenix with a seven-rayed nimbus on a palm tree.²⁸ The same figure appears on a sarcophagus in the Catacombs,²⁹ and again in the ninth-century mosaic in the church of Saint Cecilia in Rome.³⁰

²⁴ Hugo Winckler, *Arabisch.-Semitisch.-Orientalisch. Mittheilungen der Vorderasiatischen Gesellschaft*, Berlin, 1901, 5. 6. Jahrg., ss. 156, 157.

²⁵ Frazer, *Attis, Adonis, and Osiris*, II, p. 126.

²⁶ F. J. Lauth, *Die Phoenixperiode, Abhandlungen der Philos.-Philol. Classe der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, München, 1881, XV Bd., II Abtheil., ss. 316, 317.

²⁷ E. A. W. Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, 1911, I, p. 60.

²⁸ L. Twining, *Symbols and Emblems of Early and Medieval Christian Art*, 1852, pl. xxi, fig. 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pl. xxi, fig. 5. A. Bosio, *Sculture e pitture . . . della Roma Sotteranea*, 1737, I, pl. xxii.

³⁰ Twining, *op. cit.*, pl. lxxxix. Cf. for the whole matter, F. Münter, *Sinnbilder und Kunstvorstellungen der Alten Christen*, Altona, 1825, pp. 94 ff.

§5

In the vision of the tree that appears to Bors the phoenix is replaced by the pelican, also a symbol of immortality in Christian art,³¹ and often, as here, used to represent Christ.

And soo a lytel from thens he loked vp in to a tree / and there he sawe a passynge grete byrde vpon an olde tree / and hit was passynge drye withoute leues / and the byrd sat aboue and had byrdes the whiche were dede for honger / Soo smote he hym self with his bek the whiche was grete and sharpe / And soo the grete byrd bledde tyl that he dyed amonge his byrdes / And the yonge byrdes token the lyf by the blood of the grete byrd /³²

The hermit's explanation to Bors of his vision is of the utmost interest.

Thenne oure lord Ihesus Cryste shewed hym vnto yow in the lykenes of a fowle that suffered grete anguysshe for vs syn he was putte vpon the crosse / and bledde his herte blood for mankynde / there was the token and the lykenes of the Sancgreal that apiered afore yow / for the blood that the grete foule bled reuyued the chychens from deth to lyf / And by the bare tree is betokened the world whych is naked and withoute fruyte but yf hit come of oure lord/³³

Here the Dry Tree becomes the symbol of the grail. The bird, the pelican which pierced its own breast and shed its own blood to sustain its young, is the well-known symbol of Christ.³⁴

³¹ F. Münter, *op. cit.*, p. 90. Cf. also Twining, *op. cit.*, pl. lxxxvii.

³² Malory, ed. H. O. Sommer, 1889, XVI, ch. 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, XVI, ch. 13. Lot explains the name Bohort as from the *Passio Matthaei* (*Lancelot*, 1918, pp. 124, 125). He says also (p. 123), "En dehors des apocryphes, l'Estoire a utilisé aussi des sources orientales qu'elle a détournés intentionnellement de leur sens, ou qu'elle n'a pas bien comprises."

³⁴ There is an interesting picture now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, by Girolamo dai Libri, 1474-1556, of the Virgin and Child enthroned in front of a rich green tree; to the right and interlaced with the green tree is the Dry Tree on the bare boughs of which there is a peacock. The peacock, like the phoenix and the pelican, is often found as a symbol of immortality.

§6

Seth's vision of the tree makes the connection with Christ still more explicit. In the vision of Bors the Dry Tree represents the cross, the pelican the bleeding figure of Christ who shed his blood that mankind might be saved from death. Seth sees the Dry Tree flourish and become green and living when Christ, the promised fruit, appears on the tree (cross).

The vision of Seth is an addition to the apocryphal Adam and Eve story. In brief summary, the story, as it concerns the present study, grew somewhat in this way. Oderic and Mandeville, as it will be remembered, had it that the tree was blasted and became dry when Christ was crucified.³⁵ This explanation replaced an earlier one that the tree was struck dry when Adam sinned. The shedding of the leaves of the tree from which Adam and Eve ate the fruit in the Garden of Eden is the first indication of the blight that had fallen on mankind. In the oldest description, to be sure, that in the Jewish *Apocalypsis Mosis*, which, it is thought, was written between the first and the fourth centuries,³⁶ the tree itself does not lose its leaves, though surrounded by others that do. In the account which Eve gives of her fall she says, "I began to seek, in my nakedness . . . for leaves to hide my shame, but I found none, for, as soon as I had eaten, the leaves showered down from all the trees . . . except the fig tree only. But I took leaves from it and made for myself a girdle and it was from the very same plant of which I had eaten."³⁷ Here the tree of life follows the original tradition curiously. In Enoch's description "its leaves and blooms and wood wither not forever."³⁸

³⁵ See above, p. 64.

³⁶ R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 1913, II, pp. 129, 130.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 146. Charles's translation is based mainly on MSS. D (Ceriani) and C (Tischendorf). In the Armenian version the fig tree is likewise the only one that does not lose its leaves. Conybeare, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 1895, VII, p. 225.

³⁸ *Enoch*, I, ch. 24. Charles, *Apocrypha . . . of the Old Testament*, II, p. 204.

In the Ethiopian redaction of the Penitence of Adam of the fifth century, Adam himself was shown the tree when he quitted the garden. He saw that God had changed its form and that it had become dry, whereupon he trembled and was filled with dread.³⁹ And in a curious document of the Egyptian Christians, who, as Budge notes, never succeeded in ridding their minds of some of the picturesque beliefs of their pagan ancestors, the trees all become bare. In this story John was taken by an angel upon his wing of light to Paradise. In response to his request, he was shown the tree of life, from which Adam ate the fruit, standing bare in the middle of the garden and Adam himself gathering the dried leaves which were under the tree. When he asked for an explanation, he was told that "from the moment when the Devil entered into Paradise, and seduced Adam, and Eve his wife, the trees, which up to that time had possessed a sweet smell, ceased to have any smell at all, and their leaves began to fall off. And Adam used to dress himself in the leaves, and to make them be witnesses for him in the judgment because of what he had done."⁴⁰

? knowledge

In these descriptions of the tree nothing is said of its blooming again. The blighting of the tree—its death as the result of Adam's sin—is insisted on. In the fifth-century *Gospel of Nicodemus*,⁴¹ however, Seth tells of how he was sent to Paradise by Adam, who was near death, to ask for the oil of mercy. Michael refused to send the oil, but promised that in five thousand and five hundred years Adam and his descendants should be healed of every disease by the Son of God, who would then appear on earth. The promise contains no reference to the tree. The first

³⁹ S. C. Malan, *The Book of Adam and Eve*, 1882, p. 4. Cf. also Migne, *Dictionnaire des apocryphes*, I, p. 298. Here no date is given and other material is added.

⁴⁰ *The Mysteries of St. John the Apostle and Holy Virgin, Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, ed. and transl. E. A. W. Budge, 1913, pp. 249, 250. The date of the MS. is 1006 A. D.

⁴¹ *Evangelia Apocrypha*, ed. Tischendorf, 1853; *Evangelium Nicodemi*, Pars Altera, cap. III (XIX).

statement that connects the tree of Adam with the tree of Christ is found in the twelfth century, when the story was fused with the legend of the cross.⁴² Seth is said to have brought back with him a twig from the tree of life which became in time the wood from which the cross was made. The *Legenda Aurea* includes this explanation of the origin of the wood in the history of the cross.⁴³

The next addition made to the developing story was the vision of Seth. This is not found before the thirteenth century. When Adam was past nine hundred years old, he sent Seth to Paradise along a path in which the seared tracks of Adam and Eve were his guide. Seth asked the angel at the gate when Adam would be permitted to leave the world, and whether he should have the promised oil of mercy. He was bidden to look in at the gate and heed what he should see. A rich country was spread out before him, a spring and four streams, and a great tree of which he was told, "Þis tre was dri for Adam's sin." He looked again and saw an adder about the tree; he looked a third time and saw the tree clothed with bark and leaves and with a newborn child in the branches at the top of the tree. The child, he was told, is Christ, who shall cleanse Adam's sin. He was given three pippins. When he returned he found his father still alive. And when he told him what he had done Adam laughed first and then died. Seth laid the three grains under his father's tongue and buried him in the vale of Hebron. Out of his mouth grew three trees, from the wood of which the cross was made on which our Lord suffered his passion.⁴⁴

⁴² W. Meyer, *Die Geschichte des Kreuzholzes vor Christus, Abhandlungen der Philos.-Philol. Classe der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Bd. XVI, Abtheil. II, München, 1882. Johannes Beleth, 1170, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum*, cap. 151, De exaltatione sanctae crucis.

⁴³ J. Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Graesse, 1846, cap. LXVIII, De inventione Sanctae Crucis.

⁴⁴ The earliest version seems to be that in the *Image du Monde* version II, 1247; see C. Fant, *L'Image du Monde*, Upsala, 1886, pp. 5-6; 31-32. For later versions of this story in various languages (thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) see: *Legends of the Holy Rood*, R. Morris, *E. E. T. S., Orig. Ser.*, XLVI, 1871, pp. 18, 19, 62; *Canticum de Creatione*, C. Horstmann,

§7

The legend of the Dry Tree seems to go back to the utmost antiquity, to represent beliefs difficult for us to understand. Following one line backwards, we find the Christian tale attached to an already famous tree, a center of worship in pre-Christian times. It appears in apocryphal stories of Adam and Eve which bear some relation to similar tales connected with Mohammed. One sacred tree mentioned by the Persian geographer, Hamd Allah, grew from the staff of Mohammed. "As such it had been transmitted through many generations, until it was finally deposited in the grave of Abu Abdallah Dásitáni, where it struck root and put forth branches."⁴⁵ This tree is explicitly called *l'Arbre Sec*. Bovenschen also notes—without stating his source, however,—a connection with Mohammed. "Among the Arabians," he says, "there was the belief that mere contact with the prophet would make the Dry Tree green again."⁴⁶

The beginnings of the legend are vague, but it is possible to conjecture. Yule thought that the words of Ezekiel probably gave rise to the story. In Ezekiel XVII, 24, we read: "And all the trees of the field shall know that I, Jehovah, have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree, have dried up the green tree, and have made the dry tree to flourish."⁴⁷ Zarncke in his *Prester John*

Anglia, I, 1878, p. 303; *Dboec van dem Houte door Jacob van Maerlant*, J. Tideman, in *Vereeniging ter Bevordering der Nederlandische Letterkunde*, Werken, Jaarg. I, Afl. 2, Leiden, 1844; *Van deme Holte des hilligen Cruzes*, C. Schroeder, Erlangen, 1869; *Ly Myreur des Histors de Jean des Preis*, C. J. A. Borgnet, Brussels, 1864, I; *Cursor Mundi*, R. Morris, E. E. T. S., *Orig. Ser.*, LVII, ll. 1237-1432; *Sulla Leggenda del legno della Croce*, Adolfo Mussafia, *Sitzungsberichte der Philos.-Hist. Classe der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, LXIII, Jhg. Wien, 1869.

⁴⁵ *Marco Polo*, ed. Yule-Cordier, I, p. 135. Zeschwitz, *Kaisertum*, Leipzig, 1877, pp. 48, 165. Cf. also G. Weil, *Biblische Legenden der Muselmänner*, 1845, p. 284.

⁴⁶ *J. von Mandeville und die Quellen seiner Reisebeschreibung*, *Zt. für Erdkunde*, XXIII, 1888, p. 238.

⁴⁷ There are numbers of illustrations to be found in the works of the Biblical writers showing familiarity with the imagery based on the tree of life. See *Prov.* III, 18; XIII, 12; *Ezek.* XLVII, 12; *Rev.* II, 7, XXII, 19. The

quotes a curious passage from a fourteenth-century Cambridge manuscript in which it is stated that *Arbre Sec* is mistakenly used for *Arbre Seth*.⁴⁸ Such confusions gave rise to many a story in the Middle Ages. But back of the Seth story and similar legends there lies a world of primitive belief belonging to the life tree,⁴⁹ especially in its connection with the entrance of death into the world.

Of the several kinds of stories which, according to Frazer, were devised by primitive philosophy to explain the fact that men die, three are of interest to this study: the moon type, the serpent type and the banana type. The waxing and waning moon, and the cast skins of serpents were emblems of immortality, whereas the banana tree, which perishes as soon as it produces its fruit, was an emblem of mortality. He thinks that all the myths that relate how a serpent became the evil agent of human death may be referred to an old idea of a certain jealousy and rivalry between men and creatures which cast their skins. The story he supposes was of a conflict between man and his rivals for the possession of immortality, a contest in which the victory always remained with the animals. The banana type he illustrates by a story current among the natives of Poso, a district of the Central Celebes, which relates that our first father and mother mistakenly refused a stone which was offered them by their Maker, and were given instead a banana, which they ate. Whereupon a voice from heaven said, "Because ye have chosen the banana, your life shall be like its life. When the banana tree has offspring, the parent stem

fathers also make use of it. See Ambrose (Migne, *Patrol.*, XIV, 940-941), who calls Christ the tree of life; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIII, c. 20 (Migne, *Patrol.*, XLI). Hugo of Saint Victor (Migne, *Patrol.*, CLXXVI, 643) speaks of three trees: the first, the actual tree; the second, Jesus Christ; the third, the wisdom of God. Man was crucified for the third, fell because of the first, and was saved by the second.

⁴⁸ Fr. Zarncke, *Der Priester Johannes*, II, pp. 127-128. Cf. Marco Polo, ed. Yule-Cordier, I, p. 139.

⁴⁹ See F. Piper, *Der Baum des Lebens*, *Evangelisches Jahrbuch*, XIV, 1863; A. Graf, *La Leggenda del Paradiso Terrestre*, 1878; A. Wünsche, *Die Sagen vom Lebensbaum und Lebenswasser*, *Ex Oriente Lux*, Winckler, 1905.

dies; so shall ye die and your children shall step into your place. Had ye chosen the stone, your life would have been like the life of the stone changeless and immortal.'"⁵⁰

All three of these types throw light on our legend. The tree of the moon with the tree of the sun was seen by Alexander when he was about to die, and warned him of his death. The other two are more closely connected with the Dry Tree. The banana story makes the tree important at the outset. Though less well known than the palm and the fig, the banana is also identified with the tree of life as the "fig of Adam." It was cultivated in India at the time of Alexander. Used for as many purposes as the palm (it is said to replace grain, potatoes, beets, hemp and flax in other countries), it was closely bound up with the lives of the people. They knew all its ways.⁵¹ Its habit of drying and so perishing after it bore its fruit, a habit that made it a suitable illustration for the loss of immortality by Adam and Eve, may have given rise to the use of the Dry Tree as a symbol of death. Primitive stories do take their beginnings often from some such simple observed natural facts.

The serpent story is the story of the Fall of Man, which in its original form was an explanation of the origin of death. Frazer reconstructs the primitive tale by a comparison of many versions. Adam and Eve were created and placed in the Garden of Eden.

As a crowning mercy he [God] planned for our first parents the great gift of immortality, but resolved to make them the arbiters of their own fate by leaving them free to accept or reject the proffered boon. For that purpose he planted in the midst of the garden two wondrous trees that bore fruits of very different sorts, the fruit of the one being fraught with death to the eater, and the other with life eternal. Having done so, he sent the serpent to the man and woman and charged him to deliver this message: "Eat not of the Tree of Death, for in the day ye eat thereof ye

⁵⁰ Frazer, *The Belief in Immortality*, 1913, I, pp. 60-73. Cf. also his *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, I, pp. 51, 71.

⁵¹ Larousse, *Nouveau Dictionnaire*.

shall surely die; but eat of the Tree of Life and live forever." The serpent twisted the message, and so men die. But the serpent by shifting his skin lives forever.⁵²

This story goes back to remote ages. A Babylonian cylinder seal, 2750-2000 B. C., now in the British Museum, is supposed to represent it. There is a seated figure on each side of a tree-palm. The male figure wears a head ornament emblematic of deity. Behind the body of the woman there is a wavy serpent standing erect on his tail as if ready to speak to her.⁵³

Assyrian tablets, 800 B. C., now also in the British Museum, show winged figures before the tree of life, a palm.⁵⁴ In such figures, says Jastrow, the belief is shown that only the gods can pluck the fruit. Later the gods were replaced by human figures, and the primitive myth, whatever its original signification, became a tale to illustrate the belief that man forfeited immortality—the prerogative of the gods—by an act of disobedience. Such stories explain the presence of death in the world. Death is due either to eating the forbidden fruit or to the failure to eat it. Both motifs are found in primitive tales.⁵⁵

These old designs suggest certain likenesses to descriptions of the Dry Tree. In the Alexander stories, the phoenix, the symbol of everlasting life, takes the place of the symbol of Aschur often seen over the tree of life. Aschur "seems to be identical with the ancient Babylonian Anu, God of Heaven and the Sun," according to Jastrow.⁵⁶ In the Seth story, when Seth sees the Dry Tree turn green, he also beholds the infant Christ in its branches, here clearly the symbol of immortality. Christ is to conquer death brought into the world by the sin of

⁵² *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, I, pp. 51-52.

⁵³ T. G. Pinches, *The Old Testament in the Light of the Historical Records and Legends of Assyria and Babylonia*, 1908, pp. 79, 80.

⁵⁴ M. Jastrow, *Bildermappe zur Religion Babylonians und Assyriens*, 1912, nos. 55, 56, 165, 213-217.

⁵⁵ M. Jastrow, *The Civilization of Babylonia and Assyria*, 1915, pp. 425, 426.

⁵⁶ M. Jastrow, *Bildermappe*, p. 49.



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Adam who dared to pluck the fruit of the tree of life. In the vision of Bors, the bird becomes the pelican, often the symbol of Christ. It is represented as shedding its own blood to give life to its young. The vision is directly explained as symbolical. The Dry Tree is the cross, and the bird is Jesus, shedding his blood to give mankind eternal life.

This old story reveals a curious process of development. A symbol in the beginning meant to explain the presence of death in the world, it became a symbol of immortality and was taken over by the Christians, then made literal and attached to definite localities and individual trees, and finally used by voyagers and romancers to indicate a fabulous place, but one that could be reached by the adventurous.

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